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During my first meeting with Ezra, my student consultant, we discussed our goals for the collaboration. A strong student, Ezra had worked for two years as a peer tutor at Reed: "I have loved and succeeded in my academic career," he wrote in his application, "but watched many of my peers struggle with professors who equated academic rigor with rigid teaching approaches that many found unhelpful and confusing. A student voice in the pedagogical process could go a long way." It was my fourth year at Reed and the teaching consultant program seemed like a great way to improve my work in the classroom.

Ezra observed both of my classes that semester. One was Humanities 110, a required first year course covering texts from the Ancient Mediterranean World with an emphasis on writing and small group discussions. The other was my English course, The American Con Artist. The course challenges national myths of self-making and progress by examining two alternative narratives that fascinated nineteenth- and twentieth-century US writers: the individual swindler and the capitalist system of big wins and big losses. Both sides of these myths—the self-made man and the con man, the American Dream and the false promises of opportunity—still shape our understanding of individual success and failure and still fuel economic and social policy. In the course, we trace this cultural history through a range of literary genres, from autobiographies, essays, and sermons to short stories and novels. On the first day of any class, I usually run through the syllabus and give students a chance to ask questions. In our meeting, Ezra and I went over the syllabus together to talk about areas I might clarify. "How should we explain what I'm doing there?" he asked. We decided to add a paragraph about the consultant program:

> Our class is participating in an exciting new program through Reed's Teaching and Learning Center in order to engage in dialogue about pedagogical practices. Ezra Schwartz, our student consultant, will be working with me to help foster a dialogue about teaching and learning by observing our classes and gathering input from you about ways to improve teaching and learning in the course. I see this program as an opportunity to work on some of the challenges of discussion-based conferences, especially in such a large class: keeping the discussion focused without being overly directive; promoting productive participation; and communicating complex ideas and goals without sacrificing clarity. We welcome your input throughout the semester so please feel free to speak with me and/or Ezra about your experiences in the course.

Collaborating on this paragraph helped me not only to communicate my goals to students but also clarify my goals for myself. So many of the benefits of the collaboration came out of a process like this one: a question led to a discussion and that discussion led to a clearer articulation that served everyone in the classroom. But Ezra's contributions did not stop there. When we met each week to discuss his observations in the conferences, he was able to offer insights only a student consultant would be able to make.

EZRA:

Each day I would come to class, take a seat in my corner, and record a rough transcript of the conference, including both conversation and activities. I took down what was said, and by whom, and how long it took to say. During group or individual activities, I observed whether students seemed to be participating and participating effectively, and took down what I saw. I annotated my notes with general observations on conference dynamics, details about why I found specific actions less than ideal, and suggestions for what might have worked better. In this way I produced a record of the class that was both objective and subjective. Sarah and I could identify patterns of participation (Whenever student X starts to say something, student Y or student Z interrupts them. What can we do about this?) and I could give Sarah my other observations (Students didn't seem very talkative for this pair activity. Maybe it would have worked better in groups?)

Every Friday, Sarah and I would meet to discuss the past week's conferences. I would produce from my annotated transcripts an outline of things to talk about, and then we would discuss these things and any other concerns Sarah had. Here's a sample outline from my first week with Sarah.

> NOTES ON FIRST MEETING
>
> *Rigor, structure vs. flow.*
>
> *Successes:*
>
> *Obvious/generally effective teacher. Thoughtful, caring, engaged, engaging, respectful, etc. etc.*
>
> *Funny, pleasant, easy-going. Mixing levity w/rigor.*
>
> *Work on:*
>
> *Board writing.*
>
> *Structuring conversation/class in general*
>
> *Saying things and then not doing them*

Phrases like "Board writing" and "Saying things and then not doing them" are perhaps humorously vague or simple without context, but both 'suggestions' ended up becoming recurring themes in my collaboration with Sarah, and helped us get at new ways of achieving Sarah's goals of maintaining rigor without sacrificing clarity, and balancing structure and flow. "Saying things and then not doing them" referred to Sarah's habit of introducing a structured plan early in a class and then abandoning it, often with a good reason. For instance, Sarah would tell her English class that we would spend ten minutes analyzing some portraits of the Washington family, but discussion of the portraits would end up lasting closer to forty minutes

because students kept offering insightful points and the conversation remained relevant and interesting well after the allotted ten minute time period.

This flexibility was a good thing. There's no reason to arbitrarily limit discussion to ten minutes when it's good discussion. The problem was that by so readily abandoning the initially introduced structure, the structure ceased to be structure at all. Over the semester, I worked with Sarah on her tendency to say things and then not do them, suggesting that she distinguish for herself when she introduced structured plans out of real time based necessity, and when she introduced structure only for the sake of structure. It was the latter that tended to lead to problems, and so we worked on how to plan for a class with more room for fluidity.

SARAH:

Ezra was always tactful and respectful when discussing his observations with me. "What are your goals when you write on the board?" Ezra asked me when we sat down to discuss the first week of classes. The question seemed simple and I was ready with an answer. When I was in graduate school, a speaker at a teaching workshop explained that writing on the board facilitated student discussion. With a feeling of self-satisfaction, I explained how, when my back was turned to the class, students would take ownership of the discussion, making eye contact with one another while I transcribed the key points on the board. They would keep generating ideas independently rather than looking to me, I explained. Board-writing was one of the pedagogical tools I'd used frequently in my four years at Reed, where conferences—seminars driven by student interest rather than professorial expertise—required a group engaged by the material and speaking to each other rather than directing answers only to me. Since I was looking at the board rather than the students when I wrote on the board, I had no way of knowing that they were taking this time to gel as a group and reflect on the material, but I assumed that they were. Ezra had the perspective I lacked. "When you get up to write on the board," he told me, "they're all just staring at your back."

Any observer could have told me that my board writing was less effective than I thought but Ezra's question sticks with me because it turned out to be such a powerful insight. As we discussed my reasons for relying on the board, we exposed some of the challenges I was facing in my Humanities 110 course. The course has a lot of writing and a heavy reading load: literary, historical, and philosophical texts from the Ancient Mediterranean, beginning with Mesopotamia and ending with Rome. Although I'd occasionally encountered some skepticism from students who would never have taken the course if it weren't required, I'd won most of them over by the time we entered the spring semester. One year, at Parents' Weekend, a father introduced himself to me after conference as the father of a student I'd taught the previous year, a Physics wiz with no interest in the Humanities. "When I visited him freshman year, he told me not to bother coming to this conference because Hum 110 was a waste of time. But then this year he told me I had to come to your conference even though he's not in it anymore. He ended up liking Hum 110 almost as much as his other classes and he wanted me to see it for myself."

This conference was different. Few students did the assigned reading and the discussions careened from one generalization to the next. The few participants who were coming to class prepared expressed frustration with their peers and I shared their frustration. I wanted to

encourage everyone to participate while ensuring an informed discussion. With the majority of the students coming to conference unprepared, the caliber of the comments suffered and the discussions lacked substance. I didn't want to let misinformed or misleading comments go unchallenged, but I feared that correcting each inaccurate point would shut down the discussion altogether. I found that writing down what was said for several minutes gave students a chance to challenge one another and, if no one did, I could then circle back to a question or claim. The system worked well, but recording the comments on the board inadvertently implied, Ezra pointed out, a status of authority. Instead of recording salient points made in a lively discussion, the notes I took on the board gave me a record of what was said but left students wondering what to write down themselves. They would be better served, Ezra suggested, if I kept notes on my own pad of paper when necessary. His question led to a larger question that continued to shape our collaboration for the rest of the semester: how could I get the students to engage with one another and take responsibility for the discussion?

EZRA:

Mid-semester feedback was supposed to be a chance to really address the issues of the Hum conference. Sarah and I had been discussing these issues for several weeks, and now would be the best chance to get a student perspective and hopefully improve the conference significantly. But for most of the time devoted to gathering student feedback, this prospect did not seem promising. Students wrote out answers to the questions Sarah and I had written (2. What isn't working in this conference? What are you struggling with? If you have problems, do you feel disengaged from Hum in general or from the conference specifically? 4. What are you doing to engage with and learn from the class material? What could you do differently?) either silently or while talking with one another about unrelated topics. As students began to turn in their answers to me, I was feeling discouraged.

After most of the students were done writing, I opened up a discussion about classroom dynamics. I had been told that sometimes the best way to improve a conference is to let the students discuss conference issues with one another directly. Quiet students realize that their contributions would be valued, louder students realize that they have to give other students a chance to speak. Several students felt that Sarah talked too much, that she did not give the students the authority to direct the conference in the way some other Hum 110 conference leaders do. No one offered a particularly strong dissenting opinion. But finally, someone asked "What does Sarah think of the class?"

"I guess she thinks a lot of the same things that you do: she knows that she's talking a lot and that you think that it's too much, and she thinks that it's too much too. But she realizes that a lot of people aren't really doing the reading, and she sees how that can lead to-" I asked myself whether I should repeat Sarah verbatim. Was 'bullshitting' too harsh a word? "-less than rigorous discussion." The students seemed to understand that this meant 'bullshitting.' "And when the discussion isn't as rigorous, Sarah feels like she needs to take more control and talk more than she wants to."

Everything was out in the open. They knew that she knew, and soon she would know that they knew. Nobody was particularly happy with how the class was going. So what were we going to

do about it? As it turned out, the out-in-the-openness was the hard part and the doing-something-about-it came fairly naturally. A student suggested to the class that they agree to a sort of pact amongst themselves, in which they would all do the reading — really do the reading well — and ensure that in future conferences, Sarah would have no need to offer the sort of input that they had found overbearing. (Considering this was a class whose syllabus included much of Genesis, I thought it might be fun, if not a bit grandiose, to call this pact a 'covenant,' although I kept this suggestion to myself.)

What did I actually do here? What did I contribute to this classroom change? I hope it doesn't sound falsely modest if 'not much' is my answer. There were times throughout the semester where I worked really hard, thinking through issues by myself, discussing things with other student consultants and with Sarah, even doing research into pedagogy journals. And there were occasions where this resulted in insights and ideas, some of which proved fairly effective. But this occasion, this pact, was all the students' idea. It didn't need to be me in the room that day, it just needed to be somebody, somebody who knew the class and the students and Sarah and the problems, someone who the students felt comfortable being open with. Okay, so in fact, it probably did have to be me. But my point is that it *could* have been anybody in my position.

Both Sarah's board writing problem and the class pact illustrate the limitations of a teacher's perspective. There are some things that a teacher simply cannot see or hear or say, for whatever reason. And that's why simple things, like writing on the board, can be turned into Important Pedagogical Strategies, that sadly, just don't work, and why big things, like a class that isn't reading or talking can seem so difficult to address even when addressing them is the only thing that really needs to be done. Since Hum has a fixed structure of readings and assignments, my discussions with Sarah focused mostly on classroom dynamics.

Perhaps I've been focusing too much on my role, and ignoring the specific perspective I brought to that role. When I learned that I would be consulting for Hum 110, I was excited. Here would be a chance to revisit some of favorite and some not-so-favorite texts as a knowledgeable upperclassman. I remember arguing as a freshman about the correct interpretation of Plato. Now, with several semesters of philosophy study under my belt, would I be able to prove that I was right all along? More importantly, though, consulting for Hum would also be a chance to help a professor understand the range of student perspectives on the class, and how they differ from the perspectives of the faculty.

Hum 110 is a notorious class at Reed required for all first-year students. Officially, Hum 110 "introduces students to humanistic inquiry by considering a range of artistic, intellectual, political, and religious strategies that emerged in ancient Greece and in the larger Mediterranean world of which it was a part" and "serves as the College's foundational writing course and introduces students to the skills and habits of mind necessary for academic inquiry in their future work at Reed." Unofficially, Hum 110 is an absurd amount of reading, several intensive essays to write and a grueling exam, continuous controversy about what the syllabus should include, and a major part of every first-year Reed student's college experience. There is a myth, I think, that students tend to either love Hum or hate it. It would be more accurate to speak of Hum conferences. Conferences as a unit tend to either engage with or disengage from the material. Even the future classics major will end up alienated from the material in a classroom full of

habitually uninterested students, and even the most STEM-focused physics major will find insights into Plato in the appropriate environment.

When I started consulting for Sarah, the first semester of Hum was already over and there seemed to be a general feeling of disengagement in the conference. I emphasized to Sarah that this was almost certainly not her fault. Hum conferences are fairly random groups of students, and sometimes students aren't engaged in the material the way they should be. The important thing, I emphasized, was not to correct some wrong that had disengaged the students, but simply to work to get reluctant students interested and participating.

As an interdisciplinary course, the Hum syllabus has so much breadth that it would be impossible for any single professor to be an expert on all that it covers. This is not a bad thing; one of the most interesting parts of the Hum experience is getting to hear a German professor's take on Thucydides, or a political science professor's take on Homer. There wouldn't be anything inherently wrong with offering an English professor's take on Aristotle. But Sarah recognized philosophy as one of her weaker fields of knowledge, and so it seemed natural to use my background as a philosophy major in my consulting on Aristotle. I even offered questions to the class, which Sarah noted was "above and beyond the call of consultant duty." She sent my questions out over the Moodle (an interactive course website) before class: "Is Aristotle concerned with what the word 'happiness' or 'virtue' means or with the concepts themselves? How is this related to the idea of practical philosophy? On what does Aristotle base his philosophical reasoning (intuitions, reasoning, empirical facts, language, etc.)?"

Sarah ended the unit with a discussion prompt about a more contemporary application of Aristotelian thought: the reasonable person standard, a term that students and faculty were debating because of a controversy about the rewording of the campus sexual assault policy. It was an opportunity to link an interpretation of philosophical language with an ongoing discussion of ethics. She asked students to analyze this issue by reading excerpts from the early 20th century Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes as an example of how Aristotelian thought helped to shape US legal practice. The debate was lively but respectful and seemed to engage students who were not usually as talkative. This is a fine way to talk about Aristotle, but probably not the typical way. It might be strange for a class of students to forever associate Aristotle with US legal philosophy rather than his contributions to the development of logic and reasoning. Sarah's integration of my more traditional approach into her own seemed to really enrich the content of the class. Students had both the perspective of an expert on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction and its historical context, and the perspective of a typical analytic philosopher to inform their own readings of Aristotle.

A similar experience of distinct perspectives occurred during the discussion of the Book of Esther. As someone who grew up in a fairly religious Jewish household, I was highly familiar with the text, which is read yearly during the Jewish holiday of Purim. Esther is a Jewish woman who hides her religion and marries the king of Persia. When one of the king's advisers tries to enact a genocide of the Jews, Esther must reveal her heritage to the king to save her people. It's a compelling story, sure, but one I associate with its being ritually chanted in Hebrew more than its narrative aspects. And so I found Sarah's mostly literary analysis of the text a little unnerving. Sarah compared the narrative of Esther to another well-known story about queens and princesses,

specifically Cinderella. Analyzing Esther through the lens of the Disney princesses is interesting, but to me this failed to rigorously address the text. I could imagine a student skimming the reading, skipping lecture, and then bringing up Cinderella in order to have something to say.

This is, of course, an unfair comparison, because Sarah's invocation of fairy tales and Disney films was insightful and coherent. But still I felt dismayed. One notable thing about the Book of Esther is how it lends itself to a fairy tale reading because of its relative lack of explicitly religious content. Esther is the only book of the Old Testament that fails to refer to God by name. But isn't that the important part, that it's a sacred text that tells a mostly secular story? Simply treating it as a fairy tale ignores how remarkable it is that it can so be treated. In our meeting after the Esther conference, Sarah and I talked at length about the appropriate way to discuss religious texts. Is it offensive or dismissive to treat the text in such a literary fashion? Is it poor scholarship to do literary readings of religious texts? Is it possible to do a good literary analysis of religious texts without considering their religious contexts?

We did not answer any of these questions, but our discussion was far from fruitless. The ideas we introduced were helpful and applicable in later conferences, from both scholarly and pedagogical perspectives.

SARAH:

One of the challenges in any collaboration is find a way to work through difference. Although I incorporated almost all of Ezra's suggestions, at times we had to agree to disagree. When Ezra observed the class while I was writing on the board, he could see what I could not. The Esther conference, on the other hand, was equally visible to both of us but we saw it from very different perspectives. I respected Ezra's view but believed that the discussion we had about Esther was successful. The lecture had raised the genre of the fairy tale as a point of comparison and I wanted students to dig deeper into the narrative similarities and, perhaps more importantly, the differences. Although I take Ezra's response to the conversation seriously, I still want students to think about Esther narratologically and would use a similar prompt in the future. Even when I didn't act on a suggestion, the discussions were illuminating. When I assigned Roland Barthes's *The Reality Effect* in my English course, for example, Ezra asked if a work of theory belonged on an English syllabus. That discussion ended in a simple "yes." I explained why it was an important a theoretical framework for our discussion on the realist movement but even though I didn't change the syllabus, I worked to explain its purpose to the students more clearly when we got to it.

A more ambiguous discussion was about the close readings the group did of Herman Melville's*Benito Cereno.* I'd asked students two discussion questions prior to conference but our focus was primarily on the second:

> Formally, *Benito Cereno* is a famous example of the mode of narration known as free indirect discourse. There is not a first person narrator but the story is told through Delano's point of view. It's surprisingly hard to identify—we'll work on it in conference—but start thinking about it as you read. Here's a useful recap from James Wood's *What is Fiction*.

> Wood offers three options:
>
> ● *direct discourse:* He looked over at his wife. "She looks so unhappy," he thought, "almost sick." He wondered what to say.
>
> ● *indirect discourse*: He looked at his wife. She looked so unhappy, he thought, almost sick. He wondered what to say.
>
> ● *free indirect discourse:* He looked at his wife. Yes, she was tiresomely unhappy again, almost sick. What the hell should he say?
>
> What's tricky about free indirect discourse is that there's no clear distinction between the third person narrator and the character. As you read, think about how Melville indicates focalization. Why do you think he chooses to put us in Delano's head at those particular moments? How can an author represent interiority—a character's thoughts—and how does this idea of consciousness connect to the distinction we discussed in Weems between private and public selves?

Ezra and I had already talked about my tendency to say one thing and do another. In the conference, I focused on the second question, which helped guide us through a series of passage analyses, for two reasons. First, I wanted to make sure students had practice with close reading before the first paper, which was due the following week. Second, I wanted to make the students understood the definition of free indirect discourse and could spot it easily. Yet as Ezra looked around the classroom, he saw signs of boredom from a large percentage of the class; there was a widening gap between the engaged students and their bored peers. Despite the rising level of discontent among those less fond of close reading, I was glad we'd pressed on. This was a moment when my teaching goals needed to trump student satisfaction.

Sometimes, a very simple comment or question would help me rethink my goals altogether. In order to offer historical context to students without lecturing, I often post questions on the Moodle students before conference, including summaries of relevant developments from the text's period and questions for the discussion. It was great to show these to Ezra before sending; often he would offer reassurance or suggest minor tweaks, often he'd just point out areas of possible confusion. After reading a drafted prompt on George Washington's biography, for example, he expressed his confusion at a particularly gnarled sentence:

> In the first chapter, think about how understandings of slavery subtly changed between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, using the founding father myth first, to unite states divided on the slavery question and then to justify the institution through the language of the family: "the paternalist ideology of nationalism blended into and eventually authorized a paternalist ideology of slaveholding as these texts promoted both nationalism *and* slavery in the name of the father."

I'd tried to put three ideas into a single sentence merely to preface a key quotation from one of the assigned readings. By simply clarifying the syntax, I was able to turn a statement into a question students could answer:

> In the first chapter, think about how understandings of slavery subtly changed between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars: "the paternalist ideology of nationalism blended into and eventually authorized a paternalist ideology of slaveholding as these texts promoted both nationalism *and* slavery in the name of the father." How did the founding father myth function initially to unite states divided on the slavery question and then, as sectional divisions worsened, to justify the slavery as a benevolent institution?

Rewriting it not only clarified my ideas but also turned information into an invitation for discussion. In the second half of the semester, students took over these Moodle prompts, researching the authors for the week and coming up with questions. After the mid-semester feedback in Hum, Ezra and I decided to adapt this model to use in both courses: instead of writing every prompt, I asked students to circulate discussion questions before the class meeting. By the end of the semester, I was blown away but the sophistication of their prompts and the way they were able to take responsibility for the discussion before it even started. I'd tried all year to ask my students the right questions, to come up with an idea that would get them talking. In the end, the solution was to let them do the asking too. Here is the last prompt from my Hum 110 conference, written by one of my initially taciturn first year students:

> Throughout Corinthians, Paul contradicts his message several times. Paul claims that Christ came to save all sinners, but also claims that the "rulers of this age are doomed to perish." Paul also uses Christ as a uniting force for the divides that have been created, but continues to divide Christians from those who don't believe saying "we have the mind of Christ," creating an 'Us vs. Them' attitude. Finally, in book 7, he appears to have a very egalitarian view toward gender roles claiming that the husband belongs to the wife as much as the wife belongs to the husband, but in book 11 he takes on a very gendered view claiming women must remain veiled and men should not grow out their hair.
>
> This brings up the question over whether Paul's account is meant to be taken literally, or if he is merely using rhetorical techniques to try and unite his divided people. The footnotes talked about some of the contradictions (such as when he says God's weaknesses are actually his strengths, his foolishness is actually his wisdom) are just his rhetorical language, so how much of it is meant to be a true message?

The final question of the course — about the tension between truth and rhetoric, content and form — seems a fitting (if somewhat hubristic) note to end on. Can you ever separate one from the other? Thinking about how to communicate ideas with Ezra helped me explore those ideas with greater complexity, deepening my understanding of the material I was teaching as well as the methods I wanted to use.